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Toxic Waste Charges Probed

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PLANT CITY - As health officials formulate a strategy for testing wells near Coronet Industries, a sheriff's officer says deputies are making it a priority to investigate criminal allegations against the phosphate processor.

Sgt. Mark Yost of the sheriff's environmental protection unit said Monday that deputies are investigating claims by former Coronet employees that top management and owners ordered them to dump toxic waste and deceive government regulators.

Meanwhile, officials from the county's Environmental Protection Commission and the state Department of Environmental Protection, as well as health officials will convene today to discuss strategies for testing residential wells.

The meeting will not be open to the public.

"It's a time when the agencies can come together to plan a strategy and approach to the case. We also may discuss issues that might need to be forwarded on [to the sheriff's office] for their perusal," said Richard Garrity, executive director of the EPC.

Residents near the 100-year-old Coronet plant want their wells tested to determine whether high volumes of contaminants such as arsenic, lead, fluoride, chromium, cadmium and gross alpha radium - found in groundwater and soil at the plant - have seeped into their drinking water.

State and county health officials are discussing who will conduct the additional testing and how many wells will be tested. But those details remain unclear and could be restricted by budgetary concerns.

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"Right now, we will sample a few wells within a certain radius of the site. If there's a need, we will sample more wells," said Shaun Crawford, an environmental scientist with the state Health Department.

Initial testing will be on the same 13 wells DEP tested in 2002 as part of an ongoing contamination assessment resulting from a hydrofluoric acid spill in 1999.

DEP officials said the contamination assessment process is an in-depth one that takes time. "As part of that lengthy process, we wanted to make sure that we were looking out for and protecting public health," agency spokeswoman Meritt Mitchell said.

In one well, arsenic levels registered slightly above state and federal regulatory levels, officials said.

Ongoing Problems

The Coronet plant has a history of environmental problems, from air emissions to water contamination.

Each time the region experiences heavy rain, settling ponds at the plant release arsenic and other toxins into a nearby stream, environmentalists say.

Toxic water flows into English Creek, which eventually drains into the Alafia River. Health officials are trying to establish whether toxins found in groundwater at the plant also land in private wells or the city's water supply.

Coronet is under orders from the state to make sure the spills don't continue. By February, ponds at the plant were supposed to have been enlarged, but Coronet's environmental manager recently said another, "more proactive" plan had been established involving treating the plant's water. He didn't elaborate but said this month that no "definitive plan" was in place.

State DEP officials said they have worked closely with the plant's staff and environmental firm to develop a plan to regulate ongoing problems.

Crawford, of the health department, is reviewing the results of any well samples he can find as part of the public record at various regulatory agencies. Further testing will include tests for radium and the 10 primary metals - including lead and arsenic - as well as additional analysis for fluorides, he said.

"I don't know yet where we'll start or how much testing should be done, but those with concerns should call the county health department," said Randy Merchant, the state Health Department's environmental administrator.

"We don't have an unlimited amount of money, so we start with the immediate area and work our way out from there," he said.

County health officials "are compiling a list of names and coordinating to address residents' needs," said Cindy Morris, the county health department's environmental administrator.

Other Investigations

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has asked state health officials to conduct a public health assessment of the area to determine whether cancer-causing substances on Coronet's property or the plant's air emissions are affecting residents' health.

They also are looking at other possible sources of pollution, including eight old



landfills in the area. At least two of the landfills are on property once owned by Coronet that is now slated for the Lakeside Station housing development. One was an unregulated county dump for residential waste, and the other was a Plant City municipal dump for residential waste.

County officials are still looking at property boundaries to determine whether three others, which include an industrial waste site and used-oil disposal area, are within Coronet's immediate boundaries or on Lakeside Station property, said Paul Shiffer, a manager overseeing EPC's waste division. There are three more landfills in the general area that are not on Coronet or Lakeside Station property, the EPC's Garrity said last week.

State health officials will continue to gather data before holding public meetings in September.

Reporter Deborah Alberto can be reached at (813) 754-3765.

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